

Looking Anywhere But At You: The Gaze in Kara Walker's Silhouettes

Charlie Gleek

Comparative Studies Program, Florida Atlantic University

agleek@fau.edu

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The silhouetted cutouts in Kara Walker's *Gone: An Historical Romance of a Civil War as It Occurred b'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young Negress and Her Heart*¹ are fine with being seen but care little for the actual presence of the viewer (Berry, English, Patterson, and Reinhardt 9). They're kissing and sucking, fucking and birthing, playing and pillorying all without shame or service to the viewer. Walker's image depicts bodies, not as objects for gazing upon, but are subjects which look back or better yet look away from the viewer. Read this way, the figures in Walker's work serve to disrupt the viewer's perspective and meaning of race, and in turn represent the shifting complexity and diversity of contemporary African American identity, all through a gaze directed anywhere but towards the viewer's own.

Walker challenges the viewer's gaze on several fronts, even before one reads the subjects of particular her works. Any viewer's reading of Walker's installations are inherently contingent on their own subjectivity and experiences, a gaze that problematizes any singular or definitive interpretation of her artistry (Berger 8). The task of gazing on Walker's bodies are made challenging in her use of black silhouettes. Walker's choice for the use of this form not only hearkens back to one of the few ways in which 19th century African American women could produce art at all, but also as a means of problematizing skin tone as a racial signifier in the subjects she constructs (Shaw 18-20). Silhouettes offer a dearth of overt messages as they, in Brudhage's words, "acquire meaning because viewers' minds are unsatisfied by the sparse information the images convey" (16). In this way, a viewer gazing in search of any meaning in Walker's silhouetted bodies becomes an act of tapping into existing racial stereotypes or

¹ Hereafter referred to simply as *Gone*.

referencing constructed notions of cliché phenotypes and behaviors about black and white people alike.

The various lovers in *Gone* do not explicitly convey their race through skin color. For example, Walker constructs the image of the woman in the left foreground of the image about to kiss her swashbuckling beau as white in several respects. The woman's hair and dress are more refined, signifying a wealth and status likely reserved for white women in the Civil War period. Whiteness is further reinforced by the shy, tentative kiss the woman is about to receive from her man, again signifying the racially-coded association between whiteness and chastity, or at the very least a passive or constrained sexuality of white women. Walker contrasts this stereotypical conjuncture against the other sexual acts in *Gone*. The woman (or is it a girl?) performing oral sex on a man (or is it a boy?) atop the hill in the center of the frame reads as black, not through skin color, but through phenotypic tropes of hair, the shape of her head and lips, as well the double stereotype of black female sexual promiscuity and service to white males. Walker plays with the viewer's gaze through her form, challenging the viewer to make connections between their prior experiences and assumptions about sexuality, race, and gender in search of a stable meaning of personhood represented in *Gone*. The woman at the bottom right of the hill suggests a black racial identity again through her hair and dress, but also through the widely-held racist fiction of African American women as simultaneously producing a plethora of progeny --a logical extension of supposed sexual promiscuity --as well as that of uncaring or unfit mothers, as represented by the blood around the fallen infant's skull. This woman also has a minstrel quality in her performance of the birth act as she smiles and dances while children fall from her womb. Again, Walker is playing with the viewer's presuppositions about race and behavior

while simultaneously nodding to the racist history of antebellum minstrel shows which lampooned African Americans, slave and free alike, as buffoonish Others in contrast to an assumed polite, white, American society.

These interpretations have implications for the overall meaning of the piece. In returning to the second half of painting's title, is the woman in the left of the frame the "young negress" who is about to receive a kiss from "her heart"? If so, then Walker is complicating the viewer's reading of *Gone* by challenging their stereotypical notions of blackness in the American antebellum South. If not, then does Walker set up the images of bodies in *Gone* in contrapose which ways that the viewer understands as "historical"? Does the viewer believe that the tropes Walker is signifying in her silhouettes are accurate? Hardly, but the viewer's necessary act of refutation and critical appraisal of the figures in *Gone* again serves as a means to problematize their account and meaning of the image. The viewer's voyeuristic gaze is disrupted in *Gone* because they must rely on constructed stereotypes about race and gender, sex and sexuality, and a history of class positionality to make sense of the picture. This visual rhetorical turnaround is then a form of looking back, an oppositional gaze, as each of the aforementioned subjects asks the viewer, "what makes you read me the way that you do?" The understands the oppositional gaze as a tool for oppressed people in multiple ways; as a confrontation by looking back at the viewer as well as at others under the cosh of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism (hooks 116). The men and women depicted in *Gone* gaze back at the viewer through their ambiguity and liminality. Rather than express a downcast or subservient gaze away from the assumed white, male, bourgeois viewer, Walker's silhouettes look back through their complicated subjectivity. Contrast this against the view of Laura the maid's gaze in Manet's *Olympia*; downcast, away

from the viewer but in servitude as she holds a basket of flowers for the *fille de joie* Olympia. Whereas O'Grady rightly reads Laura as the racialized double "Jezebel and Mammy" (176), there is no similar stability of characters in Walker's *Gone*. For viewers of Walker's artistry, a color-blind gaze is not sufficient to read her silhouettes. One has to draw on the complexities of racial tropes to engage in even the simplest of assessments of her work; this is perhaps Walker's point. *Gone* and Walker's other art are as much about the viewer themselves than they are about any historical or thematic representation in these grand installations.

The second way in which Walker's silhouetted bodies challenge the viewer's gaze is the simple fact that they never look directly at the viewer. Again, the choice of form --the silhouette --is not only an allusion to 19th-century portraiture but also an overt choice on the part of Walker to work in an oeuvre which casts bodies in profile directly away from the viewer's gaze. This choice works on several fronts. First, it allows Walker to depict bodies in ways that force the viewer to assign race to images in the silhouettes where none is evident, at least by skin color. Second, the fact that the figures in *Gone* stare away from the viewer is again a manifestation of the oppositional gaze. For example, the woman with the elongated legs, seated in the center-left middle ground of the image is primarily concerned with scolding the child who's brought her a dead bird. Both figures are racialized again through stereotypical body images, including crania which would make American phrenologists dance with glee at a representation of their science fiction. The seated woman expresses her opposition to the gaze of an audience not merely because of her profiled frame, but that she is purposefully looking away from the bust of the phenotypical white male positioned behind her. The bust, standing for the intersection of white male bourgeois privilege is engaging in stereotypical voyeuristic behavior; he's staring at the

blowjob being performed by the girl up on the hill. Neither the partners in the sex act nor the woman seated behind the bust care or even recognize this trope of the viewer's gaze. This refusal to acknowledge being looked at subverts the stereotypical male gaze towards women in artistic representation (Berger 47) and thus stands for an act of resistance against racialized objectification, subservience, and other forms of oppression.

The figures represented in Walker's *Gone* are emblematic of the type of artistic production that Ashe figures as a "post-soul aesthetic (PSA)" (611). While Ashe is overt in his claim that PSA artistry is more a network of attributes than a checklist of features (613), Walker's *Gone* reflects each of the pillars of Ashe's theory, thus making it a necessary piece to include in any discussion of contemporary African American aesthetic work. Ashe suggests that PSA artists wrestle with the archetype of a cultural mulatto, figures of personhood which reflect an unstable or multiplicitous sense of race that can navigate white spaces to varying degrees (612-613). All of the figures in *Gone* are black in color, but are they necessarily 'black'? Recall the refined woman kissing her lover in the left of the frame. If she is the "negress," then she is navigating the white world through her dress, affect, and romance with the figure of the white aristocratic male. The rest of the figures in *Gone* trouble blackness in that they destabilize historical and stereotypical meanings of blackness in the minds and through the gaze of the viewer. It is doubtful that one comes away from reading *Gone* with a firm sense of African American identity, in either antebellum or contemporary America, or if one does, then such perceptions likely reflect the very presuppositions about blackness that Walker is seeking to interrogate. In addition, Walker's biography reflects the archetype of the cultural mulatto: the middle class daughter of an art professor who grew up in traditionally white spaces of Stockton

California and Stone Mountain Georgia, educated in an elite art program at Rhode Island School of Design, and regularly showcasing her work at some of the finest galleries the world over (Shaw 12-18). To this end, *Gone*, and indeed all of Walker's work --largely a product of her professional success --are cultural mulatto figures themselves, insofar that they represent varieties of blackness which have purchase and traction in the largely white world of museums, curation, and artistic consumption.

Ashe suggests that African American artists fall under the PSA banner through the ways in which their work explores meanings of blackness as a whole (614-615). The bodies in *Gone* rely on the viewer's gaze to interrogate stereotypes about blackness, of course, but also offer a sophisticated representation of blackness as a whole. Are Walker's figures intended to reflect or to provoke? To affirm or to incite? The answer is likely 'yes' to both questions as Walker's bodies suggest a historical reality in African American female servitude to white male dominance; the figure of the woman with the broom in the right foreground, vomiting while also being penetrated by what appears to be a male of refined dress. The viewer can see the history of slavery and sexual violence in this figure, yet also consider the extent to which such representations reflect the narratives of African American labor and violence in contemporary America. More deeply, how are these representations of blackness in *Gone* mediated by the viewer's gaze? Walker provides no answers in this work, of course, but simply the medium for various audiences to consider and reflect upon their continually-shifting understanding of blackness in historical and current contexts.

Finally, Ashe posits that PSA artists synthesize their cultural mulatto figurations and processes of blacksporation through a strategy of allusion and disruption, one which ultimately

produces complex and dynamic representations of African American identity (615-616).

Walker's *Gone* is an overt allusion to Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind*; the Civil War-era love story which inspired the classic American film by the same name. Walker uses the bodies in *Gone* to disrupt the viewer's revered perception of plantation life depicted in *Gone with the Wind* by explicitly problematizing race through the monochrome use of black figures and stereotypical body shapes and behaviors. As Ashe suggests, the allusion-disruption strategy is employed by PSA artists target revered cultural icons as a way of opposing "reductive iterations of blackness"; a signature feature of contemporary African American artistry (616).

Even the most straightforward reading of Kara Walker's *Gone* exposes the fallacy of treating the historical or contemporary African American experience as anything but a singular affair. The viewer's gaze upon the bodies in *Gone* meet figures who question, deride, or outright reject their assumptions, as no stable interpretation of African American identity derived from figures who so thoroughly problematize representations of race, sex, gender, and class. Perhaps all the viewer can take a from *Gone* is that meanings of blackness can only come into the fore by looking back towards or in opposition to their own voyeuristic gaze.

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